1910 JAPANESE FLOWERING CHERRY TREES
(1910 *Prunus* x *yedoensis*)
NPS Witness Tree Protection Program
National Mall & Memorial Parks
East Potomac Golf Course
East Potomac Park
Haines Point vicinity
Washington
District of Columbia

HALS DC-8
DC-8

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

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HALS No. DC-8

Location:	East Potomac Golf Course, East Potomac Park, Haines Point vicinity, Washington, District of Columbia
Owner/Manager:	U.S. Government, National Park Service/Golf Course Specialists, Inc.
Present Use:	Ornamental trees and research specimens
Significance:	The Japanese flowering cherries (*Prunus* x *yedoensis*) planted in East Potomac Golf Course are significant because the available evidence strongly indicates that they are the sole surviving specimens of the first donation of cherry trees from Japan in 1910. This contention not only identifies these trees as the oldest cherries in Washington, D.C., but also more than twice the maximum age expected for the species. Likewise, these trees have grown to extraordinary sizes.
Author & Discipline:	Jonathan Pliska, Landscape Architectural Historian, 2008
Project Information:	The Witness Tree Protection Program was a pilot project undertaken by the Historic American Landscapes Survey and the National Capital Region of the National Park Service. The principals involved were Richard O'Connor, Chief, Heritage Documentation Programs; Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Darwina Neal, Chief, Cultural Resources, National Capital Region; Jonathan Pliska, Historian, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Jet Lowe and James Rosenthal, Photographers, Heritage Documentation Programs.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The National Cherry Blossom Festival commemorates the gift of 3,020 cherry trees from the city of Tokyo to the people of Washington, D.C., in 1912. It is held annually from late March to mid-April, when approximately 70 percent of the now 3,700 trees are in bloom. These trees are a living reminder of the good will and friendship shared by the peoples of Japan and the United States. Since the early 1990s, the festival has grown into a two-week-long celebration that draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to downtown

Washington to view the trees' pink and white blossoms, and to enjoy concerts, tours, fireworks, and Japanese cultural events. The event's size and popularity are in stark contrast to the simple ceremony held on 27 March 1912, to mark the planting of the first of these trees by First Lady Helen Herron Taft and Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese ambassador. Located on the north bank of the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park, these trees are of the Yoshino cherry species and are still alive today.[1] In 1950, the National Capital Sesquicentennial Commission erected a marker nearby that honors the trees as "the first Japanese cherry trees presented to the city of Washington."[2] Recent research, however, indicates that this statement may not be entirely accurate.

The history of the famous flowering cherry trees of Washington, D.C., begins in 1885, when prominent city resident, travel writer, and photographer Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore first traveled to Japan.[3] There she was deeply impressed by the beauty of the cherry blossom and the prominent place that the flowering tree holds in Japanese culture. Upon her return to Washington, Scidmore proposed the planting of cherry trees along the Potomac waterfront to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Rebuffed for twenty-four years, in 1909 she decided to try to raise the money required to purchase the trees and then donate them to the city. On 5 April 1909, she sent a letter explaining this new plan to First Lady Taft.[4] The First Lady, who had previously lived in Japan, responded two days later with thanks for Scidmore's ongoing efforts and the welcome news that she had already "taken the matter up and am promised the trees."[5] Taft directed the White House gardener to plant ninety cherry trees of the Shirofugen cultivar, none of which remain, from the present site of the Lincoln Memorial south toward East Potomac Park.[6] The celebrated Japanese chemist Dr. Jokichi Takamine[7] was in Washington during this time, and upon learning of First Lady Taft's interest in planting Japanese cherries, offered to donate an additional 2,000 trees on behalf of the city of Tokyo. Taft quickly accepted the generous gift.[8]

On 30 August 1909, the Japanese Embassy officially informed the U.S. Dept. of State that the city of Tokyo intended to donate the 2,000 flowering cherry trees, and on 6 January 1910 they arrived in Washington, D.C. To the great disappointment of all parties,

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[1] National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History," in *National Mall & Memorial Parks* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 25 January 2007), http://www.nps.gov/nama/planyourvisit/cherry-blossom-history.htm (accessed 22 January 2008).
[2] J.J. Prats, ed., "The First Japanese Cherry Trees," in *The Historical Marker Database* (Springfield, Va.: The historical Marker Database, 2008), http://www.hmdb.org/Marker.asp?Marker=214 (accessed 23 January 2008).
[3] National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History."
[4] Ibid.
[5] Helen H. Taft to Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore, The White House, Washington, D.C., 7 April 1909, quoted in National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History."
[6] These Shirofugen (*Prunus serrulata* 'Shirofugen') trees were purchased from Hoopes Brothers and Thomas Co., West Chester, Pennsylvania. See National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History"; J.J. Prats, ed., "The 1912 Cherry Tree Plantings," in *The Historical Marker Database* (Springfield, Va.: The historical Marker Database, 2008), http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=215 (accessed 23 January 2008).
[7] Dr. Takamine was renowned for isolating the enzyme Takadiastase and the hormone adrenaline.
[8] "National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History."

a United States Dept. of Agriculture inspection team discovered that the trees were infected with insects, nematodes, and disease. To protect American growers, the USDA determined that the trees must be destroyed, and on 28 January President William Howard Taft reluctantly gave the order to burn the trees that his wife had just helped to acquire. The federal government expressed its deep regret to the Japanese ambassador, and an obvious diplomatic setback was averted when Dr. Takamine chose to donate a second, even larger group of trees. This shipment arrived in Washington, D.C., on 26 March 1912, with the first two trees planted by First Lady Taft and Viscountess Chinda following day.[9]

It has long been assumed that none of the cherry trees from the infected 1910 shipment survived destruction. However, recent investigations led by Robert DeFeo, Chief Horticulturist for the National Park Service's National Capital Region, have uncovered evidence that strongly suggests that a small group of the trees were spared, at least initially. According to DeFeo, USDA documents state that some twenty-four trees were taken to be grown under observation by government entomologists.[10] These documents come from the records of the Bureau of Plant Industry (1901-43), the branch of the USDA charged with horticultural investigation, disease control, and pathology.[11] The BPI therefore exercised its authority in recommending that the shipment be destroyed, but also, as the records indicate, in authorizing a limited quarantine for scientific analysis. While this documentation is vague and does not include a location, DeFeo believes that the trees may have been planted in the Haines Point area at the far south of East Potomac Park. Today, approximately eighteen to twenty large, old Yoshino cherry trees are located there, on land now occupied by the East Potomac Golf Course. These trees are planted in clear rows, spaced 50' from one another, and are obviously intentional plantings. This distance is far greater than that used in tree nurseries, but the regular arrangement and wide spacing might be indirect evidence of a quarantine project.[12] Moreover, the entire East Potomac Park is composed of reclaimed land dredged from the Potomac River by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1910, this land was largely unused and still in the process of being improved – a logical choice for such an endeavor.

A large amount of deadwood and decay are also present on these trees. Nearly all of the principal branches have been at least partially hollowed out – likely the result of some past infestation, and a further piece of circumstantial evidence in support of the trees' origin with the 1910 shipment. Additionally, this damage, combined with the extraordinary size of the trees, has led DeFeo to believe that they are exceptionally old

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[9] National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History."
[10] Robert DeFeo interview by Jonathan Pliska, 22 January 2008.
[11] For basic information on the Bureau of Plant Industry, its predecessors, and successors, see the overview history at U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, *Record Group 54: Records of the Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils, and Agricultural Engineering [BPISAE]* (College Park, Md.: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2008), http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/054.html (accessed 23 January 2008).
[12] DeFeo, interview.

and most likely date to the early twentieth century. Most importantly, while the trees in question are Yoshino cherries, DNA analysis proves that their genetic makeup does not match that of the trees planted by First Lady Taft and Viscountess Chinda, or any of the approximately 125 surviving trees from the 1912 shipment.[13] As only 4 percent of the trees originally delivered in 1912 remain alive today, this DNA evidence is not completely conclusive, but strongly suggests that the cherry trees planted in the East Potomac Golf Course are not part of the 1912 shipment. Moreover, as these trees are Yoshino cherries, and not Shirofugen, they are also not remnants of the lost 1909 planting. If the trees are not from the 1912 shipment or the 1909 purchase, they must be the group spared from destruction in 1910, as no subsequent cherry tree plantings are known to have occurred in Washington, D.C., until 1965, when Japan donated an additional 3,800 trees.[14]

While it has as yet not been possible to definitively prove that the cherry trees planted in the East Potomac Golf Course are the survivors of the 1910 burning, the preponderance of evidence supports this conclusion. If this is indeed the case, these trees are the oldest of all of Washington's famous flowering cherries, and are therefore among the most historically significant trees in the entire United States.

PART II. BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Prunus x *yedoensis*, commonly known as the Yoshino cherry or Japanese flowering cherry, is native to Japan, having long been cultivated in and around the town of Yoshino, from which its principal common name is derived.[15] It was first introduced into the United States in 1902,[16] where it is not naturally propagated but often planted as an ornamental tree throughout USDA hardiness zones 5B-8A, roughly comprising the area from southern Maine to California, and from southern Wisconsin and Minnesota to Texas.[17] The species is a hybrid of unknown origin, but generally ascribed to either a cross between Oshima cherry (*Prunus speciosa*) and higan cherry (*Prunus subhirtella*), or higan and Japanese cherry (*Prunus serrulata*).[18] In general, it is one of over 400 species of temperate trees and shrubs classified under the genus *Prunus* within the rose family Rosaceae.[19]

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[13] Ibid.
[14] National Park Service, "Cherry Blossom History."
[15] In Japan, the Yoshino and other ornamental cherries are commonly known as sakura.
[16] Michael A. Dirr, *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses*, 5th ed. (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 1998), 794.
[17] Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson, Prunus *x* yedoensis: *Yoshino Cherry*, rev. ed. (Gainsville, Fla.: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, December 2006), http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/ST/ST52300.pdf (accessed 24 January 2008).
[18] Dirr, 793.
[19] Liberty Hyde Bailey and Ethyl Hyde Bailey, "*Prunus*," in *Hortus Third: A Concise Dictionary of Plants Cultivated in the United States and Canada*, revised and expanded by the staff of the Liberty Hyde Baily Hortorium, Cornell University (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 918.

Prunus x *yedoensis* is a profusely blooming species with very showy, slightly fragrant pink and white flowers. Theses flowers typically measure 1" to 1 ½" in diameter and occur in clusters (racemes) of four or more. The simple, deciduous leaves typically emerge during or slightly after bloom, from March-April depending on climate. Each leaf is oblong to elliptic in shape and narrows to a slender point at the apex. Typical measurements are from 2" to 4 ½" long x 1 ½" to 2 ½" wide. The perimeter is coarsely serrated or double serrated, and leaves are arranged singly on alternate sides of the branches. Leaves exhibit pinnate venation, where lateral veins diverge on either side of one large central vein, or midrib. Foliation is dark green in the summer, glabrous above and downy on the veins and midrib below, and turns yellow in the fall. The fruit is a fleshy, round drupe, approximately ½" to 1" in diameter, and turns black when ripe.[20]

Yoshino cherry branches are slender and a reddish brown in color. The bark is reddish gray and dotted with raised pores (lenticels).[21] Overall tree form is round or vase-shaped, generally with a low, spreading crown that reaches 30' to 45' across. Average height for a mature specimen is similar to or slightly larger than its crown spread.[22] Trunk circumference and diameter at breast height are not typically measured, as the principal stems often diverge very low on a tree or even ground level. However, the circumference of the largest Yoshino cherry known to exist in the State of Virginia was recorded at 40" in 2007, and that of an average tree is expected to be considerably less. The Washington, D.C., specimens believed to date to 1910 have not been measured, but are visibly larger than the average dimensions for the species. Moreover, if these trees do date to 1910, they have been growing in their current locations for over ninety-five years, a remarkable longevity given that the maximum lifespan for a Yoshino cherry tree is typically no more than forty years.[23]

Prunus x *yedoensis* is also extremely fast growing, and in only three to four years a young tree can grow to be 15' tall and have a 6" trunk circumference.[24] This fast growth rate coupled with its beautiful blooms has made Yoshino cherry a highly popular specimen tree, although it grows best within relatively narrow environmental conditions. The species exhibits a moderate drought tolerance, but plantings near streets or parking lots will suffer from increased drought sensitivity. Additionally, they exhibit no tolerance to aerosol salt, and may therefore suffer significant damage from the salts commonly applied to roads during the winter months. Crowns become one-sided unless they receive full sunlight, and roots suffer when soil is poorly drained. Finally, *Prunus* x *yedoensis* is susceptible to a variety of pests and diseases. Typically, pest infestation involves aphids, borers, scales, spider mites, and caterpillars, but other sources, such as the nematodes

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[20] Dirr, 793; Gilman and Watson.
[21] John R. Seiler, Edward C. Jensen, or John A. Peterson, "Yoshino Cherry," in *VTree ID* (Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Tech Forestry Dept., 2008), http://www.cnr.vt.edu/dendro/dendrology/syllabus/factsheet.cfm?ID=312 (accessed 24 January 2008).
[22] Gilman and Watson.
[23] Jill Lee, "Cherry Blossoms – Restoring a National Treasure," in *Agricultural Research* 47, no. 4 (April 1999): 4.
[24] Steve Christman, "*Prunus* x *yedoensis*," in *Floridata 2.0* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Floridata.com L.C., 11 September 2003), http://www.floridata.com/ref/P/prun_xye.cfm (accessed 24 January 2008).

discovered in the 1910 shipment, are not uncommon. Likewise, bacterial and fungal-borne diseases occur in Yoshino cherry, chief among them bacterial cankers, Verticillium wilt, and black knot.[25] This general intolerance for adverse environmental conditions and vulnerability to pests and diseases are reflected in the species' short life expectancy. The fact that the trees planted in the East Potomac Golf Course have survived for such an unusually long period of time despite suffering obvious and widespread damage can be attributed to the excellent maintenance they receive from a cooperate arrangement between private course management and National Park Service arborists.[26]

[25] Gilman and Watson.
[26] DeFeo, interview.